



The bison or buffalo is an enduring animal, having come from the brink of extinction in the latter part of the nineteenth century to a relatively substantial population today. The bison is also a living symbol, or icon, with multiple meanings to different people.

The association of bison with American Indians is a firmly established and widely known image—and with good reason. Archeological evidence and historical accounts show that American Indians living in the Plains hunted bison for a period of some 12,000 years. As has often been noted, all parts of the animal could be used for some purpose: food, clothing, shelter, tools, containers, and ornamentation. Given its long association

with the people who inhabited the Central Plains and its utility to them, it is not surprising that the bison was an integral part of their lives. Buffalo were central characters in stories that were told of their beginnings as tribal people living on earth, and bison figured prominently in ceremonies designed to insure the tribe's continued existence and good fortune.

Bison bone commonly is found as food refuse in prehistoric archeological sites; but bison bones, in particular bison skulls, also are revealed as icons. Perhaps the earliest example of this occurs at the Cooper site along the Canadian River in northwest Oklahoma. There, Folsom hunters trapped herds of bison within a naturally formed, large, steep-sided gully located on the margin of the river valley. Three bison bone beds at the site indicate that the hunters were successful three different times. A bison skull painted with a red zig-zag line, found sandwiched between the bottom most layer of bones and the one above, was interpreted by the excavators to be evidence for ceremonial activities related to bison hunting. This site dates to the period 9000-8000 B.C.

Thousands of years later historic and ethnographic accounts tell of bison skulls used in ceremonial activities related to bison hunting by tribes living within the High Plains or on its border. Skulls were also placed within some earthlodges,

typically located on built-in altars opposite the east-facing entrances, so that the morning light would fall upon them (see earthlodge sketch at right). Such an altar can be seen at the Pawnee Indian Village Museum State Historic Site near Republic, Kansas. Bison were also represented in dances, such as the Buffalo Lodge dance for Arapaho women; there were buffalo societies within tribal organizations; and bison were represented in tribal fetishes, such as the sacred Buffalo Hat or Cap of the Southern Cheyenne.

Today a number of tribes have established herds that are contributing to the increase in bison numbers. The Intertribal Bison Cooperative, based in Rapid City, South Dakota, has 55 member tribes. Included are some tribes, such as the Comanche, whose nineteenth-century ancestors lived and hunted among the extensive herds present at that time; others, such as Taos Pueblo, had more limited access to the herds in historic times. Today's herds represent economic opportunity for the tribes, but the buffalo can also provide ceremonial and spiritual benefits.

The European immigrants and those Americans who settled in the Plains within the former range of the bison herds did not share the Indian tribes' long history with the bison. In fact, many of their settlements were made after the bison had

This is the second of a two-part article by Martin Stein that examines the theme of Kansas Archeology Week 2002, "Bison: Animal and Icon." Part one provided information about the natural history and nature of the bison, or buffalo as it is more commonly called. Part two looks at the multiple meanings the bison has for different people. Stein is an archeologist with the Cultural Resources Division, whose principal assignment currently is preparing the report for the archeological excavations in the Arkansas City area in the mid-1990s.

A century ago, the bison was hunted to near extinction. Today the animal continues to rebound and the icon symbolizes strength, history, and perserverance to many different people.

been killed off and the surviving animals confined to a few wildlife preserves. Many of the settlers' experiences with bison were as "bone pickers;" they gathered the numerous bones of the killed animals to sell them in town for cash to supplement their incomes.

The view of the bison in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was summarized by Mrs. Edith Connelly Ross in her chapter on the buffalo, contained in the comprehensive history of the state, *Kansas and Kansans*, published in 1918.

The plains were needed by the increasing number of Americans, to supply homes, and food-stuffs for the rest of the world. This could not be while the buffalo roamed them in freedom. As all other factors in the world's progress, the buffalo had to yield to the necessities of man and the advance of his civilization. It is a piteous thing, and a tragic, this passing of the buffalo and the Great Plains. But it had to be. The two were compelled before the coming of the white settler.

But these two—the Great Plains and the buffalo—are fixed features in the romances of the early days. The haze of passing time can never hide them. Indissolubly linked for all the coming ages, they offer yearning memories to the old hunters still living, and rich dreams of the boundless freedom and untrammelled life of pioneer times, to the romancer of the future.

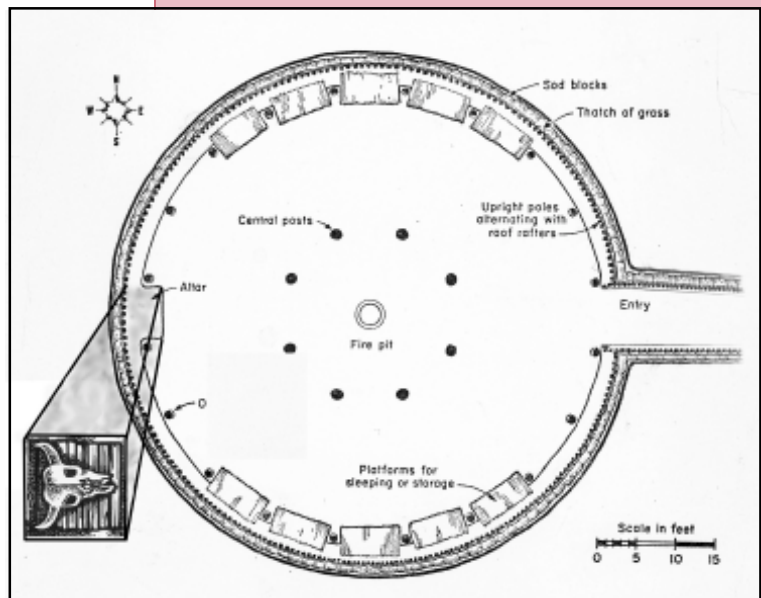
Kansas, as well as other states, recognizes its bison heritage in various ways. The Kansas state song, *Home on the Range*, begins with the phrase, "Oh, give me a home, where the buffalo roam." The state flag and state seal include bison in a tableau, and some 40 years after Mrs. Ross' observations were published, the legislature designated the buffalo the state animal of Kansas.

Buffalo are depicted as school mascots in seven Kansas high schools: Atwood, Belleville, Garden City, LaCygne-Prairie View, Meade, Onaga, and Wichita Southeast (Golden Buffalos). There are no bison mascots, however.

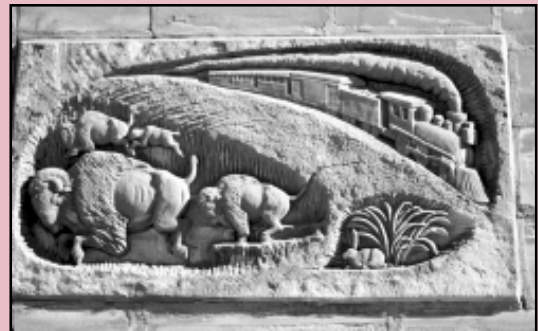
Bison statues, bison in bas-relief, and bison as architectural details can be seen in different parts of the state. The "Great White Buffalo" statue by Lumen



A statue located outside the main entrance to the building depicts the mascot of the Garden City High School Buffalos. Seven schools in Kansas use buffalo as their mascot.



*An idealized floor plan of a Pawnee earthlodge, showing the placement of posts, central hearth, and altar opposite the entry. Some lodges had bison skulls placed on wooden altars. (Illustration adapted from Figure 8-1, *The Lost Universe: Pawnee Life and Culture*, by Gene Weltfish and a drawing by Chris Prouty.)*



A bas relief tablet set into the base of the "Monarch of the Plains" bison statue at Fort Hays State Historic Site illustrates the nineteenth century railroad's intrusion into the bison's range in western Kansas.

Martin Winter, showing a mounted, spear-carrying American Indian next to a running buffalo, is located at the entrance to the Kansas History Center in Topeka. Pete Felton's bison bull, "Monarch of the Plains," stands solidly near the entrance to Fort Hays State Historic Site and looks eastward at a small display herd of bison, penned along Big Creek on the west side of Hays.

Bison have been used as symbols by the national government, too. The United States Department of the Interior seal, adopted in 1929, has a bison prominent in the foreground, and the United States Postal Service has issued a number of postage stamps with bison as the featured subject. A ten dollar bill, issued at the turn of the century, had a bison bull on the front. More familiar perhaps to most people is the "buffalo nickel," coined in 1913. The coin's designer was quoted in *The Buffalo Book* by Dave Dary:

My first objective was to produce a coin which was truly American, and that could not be confused with the currency of any other country. I made sure, therefore, to use none of the attributes that other nations had used in the past. And, in my search for symbols, I found no motif with the boundaries of the United States so distinctive as the American buffalo.



The "Buffalo Nickel" was minted between 1913 and 1938 and continued in circulation for many more years.

Suggested Reading

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1963 *The Southern Cheyennes*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Dary, David
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2001 *Handbook of North American Indians: Plains*. Vol. 13, Parts 1 and 2. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- Wedel, Waldo R.
1986 *Central Plains Prehistory: Holocene Environments and Culture Change in the Republican River Basin*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
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Selected Web Resource

www.intertribalbison.org

East Side School

Continued from 4

basement to the top floor" and "the auditorium in the building was inadequate to accommodate all who came." The description also states that the rooms were decorated in purple and white, the school colors.

Professor D.M. Bowen of Pittsburg (Kansas) Normal School spoke at the event. According to the *Oswego Democrat*, Professor Bowen spoke "of the splendid schools provided for the colored children of the city, stating that it was the best in this section and it was the best colored school in the state." The reporter added that the professor "was well pleased with the interest that the colored people were taking in their schools." At the close of the dedication ceremony, Professor B.C. Easter, principal of the East Side School, asked the audience to "inspect the new building of which the colored children are so proud...."

The East Side building is historically significant for the role it played in the

lives of so many African Americans of Labette County from 1921-1954. Children of that era attended the school five days a week for their elementary school years. The act of going to school has been and continues to be the most dominant activity of the emotional, intellectual and physical development of children. For the black children of this era, going daily to a segregated school was perhaps the single most important reinforcement of the separateness in which society held them.

Kansas law regarding segregation in education changed several times before racial segregation was banned by the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. After 1862, Kansas cities with populations above 7,000 were allowed to segregate elementary schools by race if the local school board felt it advantageous.

Only a limited number of cities were of sufficient population to legally segregate, but many smaller communities attempted to do so. Many school boards believed students would progress faster if

segregated by race. However, African American parents began to fight against the issue of segregation as early as 1880. At least 20 segregation related cases came before Kansas courts before *Brown* was filed in 1950. Several cases were decided in favor of plaintiffs when smaller communities illegally segregated schools. The *Brown* case was different from previous cases, because it directly challenged Kansas' authority to pass segregation laws that countered the 14th Amendment.

East Side School was used continuously from 1921 to 1954 and attended solely by African American children. Following the Supreme Court's ruling mandating school integration in 1954, Oswego began utilizing East Side as a junior high for both blacks and whites. It continued in that use until 1995; the construction of a new high school facility resulted in the conversion of the old high school for the junior high. Since 1995 East Side School has not been used except for storage.